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In a society where mutants and former mutants alike feel threatened by the world around them, they turn to their first, best line of defense whenever trouble arises: X-Factor, the private detective agency founded by Madrox, the Multiple Man.

X-FACTOR

Previously: The birth of Siryn and Madrox's child, dubbed Sean, went from joy to tragedy when the child's true nature was revealed in the most horrific manner imaginable: What turned out to be an infant dupe was inadvertently absorbed into Madrox while a shocked team looked on. Filled with cold, implacable fury, Siryn broke one of Madrox's fingers and swore that when she next saw him, she would break his neck.

And now a personal plea from Peter David: Last issue I begged readers to show restraint in discussing the stunning developments therein. To not ruin the story for others by posting specifics all over the place on the Internet. I have to say that, for the most part, people rose to the challenge. Reviewers bent over backwards to describe the impact the issue had on them without providing details. I am asking readers to continue that self-control because, I have to warn you, the climax of this issue will quite simply blow you away.

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Correction: Last issue we made a mistake and miscredited the haunting cover of baby Madrox. In reality it was drawn by the amazing (and hopefully forgiving) Mike McKone. Mike, our sincerest apologies.

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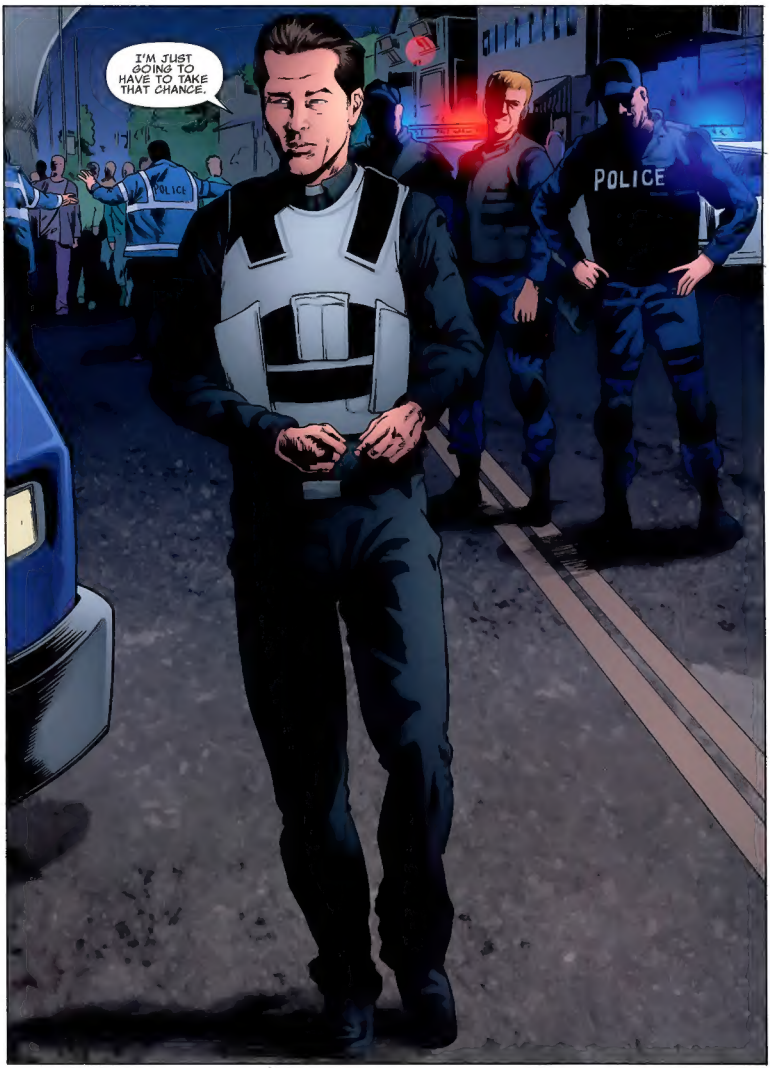
I CANNOT EMPHASIZE ENOUGH THAT YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO THIS, PADRE.
YOU'VE DONE A GOOD DEAL TO EMPHASIZE IT ALREADY, OFFICER. YOUR CONSCIENCE IS CLEAR.
IT'S NOT ABOUT MY CONSCIENCE, PADRE...
IT'S ABOUT YOU COMING BACK IN ONE PIECE.
I'D HATE TO SEE YOU DIE JUST BECAUSE YOU WERE TRYING TO...
MINISTER TO ONE OF MY FLOCK?
SHEEP AREN'T GENERALLY ARMED PADRE.
A FAIR POINT.
I WON'T BE WEARING THAT. IT'LL GIVE ME HELMET HAIR.
PADRE, THIS ISN'T A JOKING MATTER...
SERIOUSLY THEN: THIS BULLETPROOF VEST IS THE ONLY CONCESSION I'M MAKING TO MY SAFETY.
POLICE
RONNIE HAS TO BE ABLE TO SEE MY EYES. MY FACE. HE HAS TO KNOW I'M SINCERE IN MY CONCERN FOR HIM.
IF HE CAN SEE YOUR EYES, HE CAN PUT A BULLET BETWEEN THEM.
ANOTHER FAIR POINT. BUT I'M AFRAID...

SLINGS & ARROWS



24 7 MART
OH...THERE'S A NUN FROM THE PEACE CORPS WHO'S SUPPOSED TO COME BY MY CHURCH TODAY. IF I DON'T MAKE IT, SEND MY REGRETS, WILL YOU?
GOD KNOWS YOU'LL MAKE IT FINE, PADRE.
BEING OMNISCIENT, HE WOULD.
RONNIE?
RONNIE, IT'S FATHER JOHN MADDOX. I'VE COME TO TALK AS YOU REQUESTED.
WELL, WELL. IT SEEMS WE HAVE A BIT OF A SITUATION HERE, DOESN'T IT.
WHY DON'T YOU PUT DOWN THE GUN AND LET'S TALK ABOUT IT?
YOU GOTTA MAKE 'EM ALL GO AWAY. ALL THE COPS. THEN WE'LL TALK.

WELL, I DON'T THINK THAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN, RONNIE. YOU HAVE TO SEE IT FROM THEIR POINT OF VIEW: THEY CAN'T VERY WELL LEAVE A GUNMAN--
I SAID YOU TELL THEM TO GO!
I DOUBT THEY'LL LISTEN TO ME.
YOU'RE A MAN OF GOD! THEY'VE GOTTA LISTEN OR GOD'LL GET PISSED AND SMITE THEM OR SOMETHING!
THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKS, ACTUALLY...
JEEZ, RONNIE, YOU ARE SUCH AN IDIOT...
Size chocolate Box 2 FOR $10
YOU JUST SHUT THE HELL UP, CRYSTAL! THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!
HER FAULT? SHE MADE YOU ROB THIS STORE?

IT WASN'T SUPPOSED TO BE A ROBBERY! I JUST WANTED TO SCARE HIM! SHE KEPT TALKING ABOUT THIS GREAT JOB LARRY HAD, AND HOW WONDERFUL LARRY IS, AND HOW LARRY SNEAKS HER CIGS AND BEER...
...AND IT'S LARRY, LARRY, LARRY, DAY AND NIGHT!
YOU'RE A FREAKING CLERK IN A FREAKING CORNER GROCERY STORE, MAN! THAT IS ALL YOU FREAKING ARE!
YOU'RE NOTHING, MAN! NOTHING!
EVEN IF HE WAS NOTHING, HE'D STILL BE TWICE WHAT YOU ARE!
FIRST YOU, THEN HIM, THEN ME.
KA-KLIK
AAAAHHH!!!!
ALL RIGHT, NOW JUST EVERYONE CALM DOWN! RONNIE, POINT THE GUN AWAY FROM THEM AND UNCOCK THE HAMMER SLOWLY!
YOU HAVEN'T HIT THE POINT OF NO RETURN YET! YOU--
I THINK HE SHOULD SHOOT 'EM.

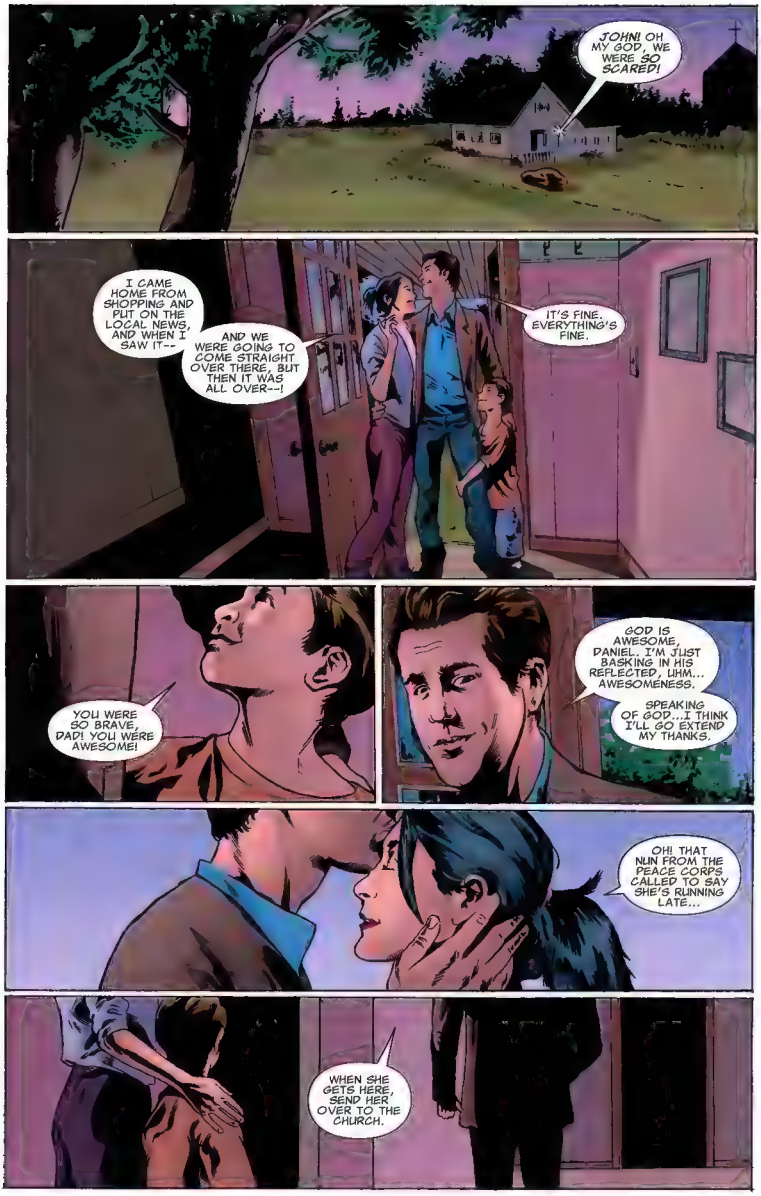
ANYTHING WOULD BE BETTER THAN LISTENING TO THIS TEENAGE BLAH BLAH BLAH ANGST.
I MEAN, SERIOUSLY: ARE YOU UNDER THE IMPRESSION THAT ANYONE GIVES A CRAP ABOUT ANY OF THIS?
THE TRUTH IS, THE ONLY REASON THE COPS OUT THERE DON'T WANT YOU TO KILL THESE TWO AND BLOW YOUR OWN BRAINS OUT IS THAT THEY'LL BE STUCK WITH DOING THE PAPERWORK AND CLEANING UP THE MESS.
AND IT'LL BE A HELLACIOUS MESS, TRUST ME ON THAT.
A *REAL* GUNSHOT, IT'S NOT LIKE ON TV WHERE THERE'S A LITTLE BLOOD SPATTER AND THE GUY DIES. THE BLOOD, THE GUTS...IT GOES *EVERYWHERE.*
YOU WANNA HAVE AN IDEA OF WHAT YOU'LL LOOK LIKE, RONNIE? OF WHAT THEY'LL BE CLEANING UP?

LET ME SHOW YOU ON THESE TWO.
THEY ALL SCREAM.
NO REASON THEY SHOULDN'T.
I HOPE FOR A MOMENT THAT THE SCREAMING WILL DROWN OUT THE SCREAMING I HEAR IN MY HEAD. EVEN NOW... AFTER A MONTH...
IT DOESN'T.
NOT EVEN A LITTLE.
BLAM! BLAM!
AHHHH!

ICE
SHOTS FIRED! ALL UNITS, MOVE IN--!
IT'S ALL RIGHT! STAY WHERE YOU ARE!
NOBODY'S BEEN HURT!
JUST SOME PRODUCE!
PRODUCE?
PRETTY DISGUSTING, HUH.
AND THAT'S JUST A PREVIEW. THEIR REMAINS WILL BE WAY MORE DECORATIVE.
FIRST OF ALL, A HEAD SHOT WILL SPATTER GRAY MATTER IN A BAZILLION DIRECTIONS.

SHOT TO THE HEART OR THROAT WILL SEND BLOOD PUMPING LIKE A GEYSER, SO YOU'LL PROBABLY WANT TO STAND PRETTY FAR BACK.
GUT SHOT'S A LITTLE TIDIER, BUT IT COULD TAKE DAYS TO DIE EVEN AFTER THE BULLET MAKES HASH OF THEIR INSIDES.
THAT'S ASSUMING THE BULLETS DON'T JUST TEAR THE STOMACH OPEN AND THE INTESTINES AND BOWELS SPILL OUT.
AND SINCE PEOPLE HAVE ABOUT TWENTY-FIVE FEET WORTH OF INTESTINES IN THEM, THAT'S LOTS OF SPILLAGE.
AND THE BOWELS! WHEWWW! THE STENCH FROM THAT'LL BE LIKE RAW SEWAGE IN--
MMMMFF!
BLAMM GGHH
I GUESS HE JUST DIDN'T WANT IT ENOUGH.

AND YOU'RE SAYING IT WAS SOME HOMELESS GUY WHO TALKED HIM DOWN, PADRE? WHERE'D HE COME FROM?
I...HAVE NO CLUE. HE JUST ENTERED THROUGH THE BACK OF THE STORE. MUST HAVE LEFT THE SAME WAY.
IMPOSSIBLE. WE HAD MEN COVERING THAT BACK ALLEY. NO ONE IN OR OUT.
WELL... MAYBE HE HAD NINJA TRAINING.
NINJA TRAINING. A *HOMELESS* GUY WITH *NINJA* TRAINING.
STRANGER THINGS HAVE HAPPENED.
NOT AROUND HERE, THEY HAVEN'T.
OH...YOU'D BE SURPRISED.
WE JUST NEED YOU TO COME DOWN TO THE STATION, PADRE. GIVE US A FULL REPORT.
YES, YES, OF COURSE. AND OFFICER...DON'T GO TOO HARD ON RONNIE, OKAY? HE'S NOT A BAD KID. HE'S JUST TROUBLED.
"THERE'S A *LOT* OF TROUBLED PEOPLE OUT THERE, JUST TRYING TO MAKE IT FROM ONE DAY TO THE NEXT...
"...AND THEY NEED ALL THE HELP WE CAN GIVE THEM."


JOHN! OH MY GOD, WE WERE SO SCARED!
I CAME HOME FROM SHOPPING AND PUT ON THE LOCAL NEWS, AND WHEN I SAW IT--
AND WE WERE GOING TO COME STRAIGHT OVER THERE, BUT THEN IT WAS ALL OVER--!
IT'S FINE. EVERYTHING'S FINE.
YOU WERE SO BRAVE, DAD! YOU WERE AWESOME!
GOD IS AWESOME, DANIEL. I'M JUST BASKING IN HIS REFLECTED, UHM... AWESOMENESS.
SPEAKING OF GOD...I THINK I'LL GO EXTEND MY THANKS.
OH! THAT NUN FROM THE PEACE CORPS CALLED TO SAY SHE'S RUNNING LATE...
WHEN SHE GETS HERE, SEND HER OVER TO THE CHURCH.

St. PAUL'S
EPISCOPAL CHURCH
DEAREST CREATOR... THANK YOU--
DON'T MENTION IT.

WAIT...WHICH CREATOR WERE YOU TALKING TO JUST NOW?
BECAUSE I'LL BET'CHA ONLY ONE OF US ANSWERS.
MADROX. I...I BARELY RECOGNIZED YOU BACK AT THE STORE...
WHO ELSE WEARS THIS SHIRT?
BESIDES THAT, I MEAN, YOU...YOU LOOK TERRIBLE.
HAVE... HAVE YOU COME HERE TO--? HAVE YOU CHANGED YOUR--?
CHANGED MY MIND FROM THE LAST TIME WE MET?
DECIDED TO REABSORB YOU?
BECAUSE YOU'RE JUST A WAYWARD DUPE WHO HAD THE TEMERITY TO NOT ONLY SET UP A LIFE OF HIS OWN...
...BUT HAVE IT BE A LIFE THAT'S BETTER THAN ANY I'LL EVER HAVE?
NO. LIVE YOUR LIFE, JOHN.
LIVE IT FOR BOTH OF US.

WAIT... WHAT'S THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?
WHAT'S THAT "M" ON YOUR FACE? WHY DO YOU LOOK SO...SO UNKEMPT? WHY'S YOUR FINGER BROKEN? SINCE WHEN DO YOU CARRY A GUN? WHAT'S HAPPENED TO YOU, MADROX?
TOOK THE GUN OFF A GUY WHO TRIED TO MUG ME WITH IT DURING MY WALK.
WHAT WALK?
FROM DETROIT.
YOU WALKED. FROM DETROIT.
YEAH.
MADROX, THAT'S SOMETHING LIKE FIVE HUNDRED MILES FROM HERE.
SIX HUNDRED TWENTY SEVEN, ACTUALLY. BOUGHT A PEDOMETER.
WHY IN GOD'S NAME DID YOU WALK ALL THAT WAY?
TOO FAR TO RUN.
JAMIE--
I'M DONE, JOHNNY-BOY. I'VE HAD IT.
AND I JUST...
I NEEDED TO SAY IT TO MY FACE. YOUR FACE.
MARK TWAIN ONCE SAID THAT IF GOD EXISTED, THEN IT WAS CLEAR HE WAS A MALIGN THUG. I THINK TWAIN WAS ON TO SOMETHING.
HIS FACE.

HE GIVES US HAPPINESS ONLY TO SNATCH IT AWAY, AND I'M TIRED OF BEING HIS WHIPPING BOY.
I'M SICK OF THE WORLD I'M LIVING IN, AND THE ONLY THING THAT'S KEPT ME GOING IS THE HOPE THAT I COULD MAKE IT BETTER. AND I'VE GIVEN UP THAT HOPE.
YOU WANT TO KNOW WHERE THE "M" CAME FROM?
"A DUPE OF MINE AND A GIRL NAMED LAYLA MILLER--WHO ALWAYS TALKED ABOUT HOW SHE 'KNEW STUFF'--WERE SENT HURTLING YEARS INTO THE FUTURE.
"THEY WOUND UP IN A MUTANT CONCENTRATION CAMP...
"HEAD SHAVED, WITH AN 'M' FOR MUTANT, JUST LIKE BISHOP HAD
"THE DUPE WAS KILLED...I ACQUIRED THE MEMORIES, AND SOMEHOW, THE TATTOO...
"...AND LAYLA WAS STUCK THERE. STILL IS.
"AND MY INABILITY TO FIND A WAY TO RESCUE HER IS JUST ANOTHER FAILURE PILED AT MY DOORSTEP."

I'M THE HAMLET OF THE MUTANT WORLD, JOHN. ALWAYS PONDERING WHAT TO DO, STRUGGLING WITH DECISION.
"TO BE OR NOT TO BE, THAT IS THE QUESTION.
"WHETHER 'TIS NOBLER IN THE MIND TO SUFFER THE SLINGS AND ARROWS OF OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE...
"...OR TO TAKE ARMS AGAINST A SEA OF TROUBLES AND BY OPPOSING END THEM.
"TO DIE, TO SLEEP NO MORE. AND BY A SLEEP, TO SAY WE END THE HEARTACHE, AND THE THOUSAND NATURAL SHOCKS THAT FLESH IS HEIR TO? 'TIS A CONSUMMATION DEVOUTLY TO BE WISHED."
ONE OF MY DUPES SPENT EIGHTEEN MONTHS WITH THE R.S.C. NOT BAD, HUH.
YOU'RE TALKING OF *KILLING* YOURSELF? BUT...BUT *WHY*, JAMIE?
BECAUSE NOTHING GOOD EVER LASTS, AND THINGS ONLY GET WORSE THAN BEFORE.
AND I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE, WAITING FOR GOOD THINGS TO CRASH AND BURN, KNOWING IT'S INEVITABLE.
I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU CAME ALL THIS WAY TO SEE ME JUST TO KILL YOURSELF.
I DIDN'T. I CAME ALL THIS WAY TO TELL YOU SOMETHING THAT I DIDN'T JUST WANT TO DO BY PHONE OR MAIL.
OH REALLY? WHAT?
I KNOW DANIEL WASN'T ADOPTED. I CHECKED. YOU AND YOUR WIFE ANNOUNCED HIS BIRTH. YOU *THINK* HE'S YOUR SON, EXCEPT...
...YOU NEED TO KNOW...THAT HE'S *NOT*.

I LAY IT ALL OUT FOR HIM, THEN. WHAT HAPPENED BACK IN DETROIT. HOW A DUPE OF MINE FATHERED A CHILD WITH THERESA, EXCEPT IT WASN'T A REAL CHILD BUT INSTEAD AN INFANT DUPE...
ONE THAT I REABSORBED THE MOMENT I TOUCHED HIM.
WHICH MEANT THAT THE SAME THING WOULD HAVE HAPPENED WHEN "JOHN" HELD HIS SON... OR, FOR THAT MATTER, WHEN I INTERACTED WITH HIM LAST YEAR.
BUT...HOW IS IT POSSIBLE? THE CHILD WOULD HAVE SHARED HALF OF THERESA'S DNA. HOW COULD--?
YOU CAN'T JUST...JUST ABSORB A WHOLE SEPARATE PERSON, JAMIE.
I DON'T THINK IT WAS EVER A "PERSON." I THINK THE DUPE'S IN UTERO PRESENCE CONVINCED THERESA'S BODY THAT SHE WAS GENUINELY GESTATING.
A HYSTERICAL PREGNANCY ON A MASSIVE SCALE.
IT STARTED TO HAPPEN WITH MONET, TOO. I REALIZE NOW SHE WAS SHOWING SIGNS OF MORNING SICKNESS EARLY ON.
BUT HER MIND'S STRONGER THAN TERRY'S AND SHE STOPPED IT WITHOUT REALIZING. A PSYCHIC MISCARRIAGE, AS IT WERE.
INTERESTING.
"INTERESTING?!" WEREN'T YOU LISTENING? I SAID DANIEL ISN'T YOUR SON!
I KNOW.

YOU--?
I'M NOT GOING INTO DETAIL BECAUSE, FRANKLY, IT'S NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS.
BUT I KNOW. I KNEW FROM THE BEGINNING.
SUFFICE TO SAY THERE WERE TEARS, AND CONFESSIONS...
AND DANIEL HAS NO IDEA.
FUNNY. EVERYONE SAYS HE HAS MY EYES.
PEOPLE SEE WHAT THEY WANT TO, I SUPPOSE.
SO YOU SEE, JAMIE... GOOD THINGS DO HAPPEN IF YOU HAVE THE PATIENCE TO SEE THEM.
I GUESS YOU'RE RIGHT.
TOO BAD I'M OUT OF PATIENCE.

GIVE ME THE GUN, JAMIE.
CAN'T DO THAT.
YOU WANT ME TO STOP YOU. YOU WANT ME TO TALK YOU OUT OF THIS.
FOR A WHILE, THAT'S WHAT I THOUGHT, TOO. BUT NOW--
NOW I'M THINKING I JUST WANT SOMEONE TO CALL THE TEAM AND LET THEM KNOW I'M GONE. AND IT'S OVER.
THEY'RE STILL THERE, Y'KNOW. THEY'VE GONE ON WITHOUT ME.
I CALL THE FIRM FROM PAY PHONES EVERY FEW DAYS, JUST TO HEAR TERRY ANSWER AND SAY, "XF INVESTIGATIONS, HOW CAN WE HELP YOU?"
THEN I HANG UP. BECAUSE SHE CAN'T HELP ME. NO ONE CAN.
I CAN. GOD CAN.
YOU CAN'T, AND HE WON'T.
THEN HELP YOURSELF! WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT HERE IS A PERMANENT SOLUTION TO A TEMPORARY PROBLEM...
THE PROBLEM IS LIFE, AND THAT'S PERMANENT, AND THIS IS THE ONLY SOLUTION!
I CAN'T STAND BY AND LET YOU DO THIS, JAMIE.
WHAT IF I THREATEN TO ABSORB YOU? WILL YOU STAND BY THEN?
NO.

I WON'T!
HGGGGGG
I BELIEVE YOU. AND I THOUGHT YOU'D SAY THAT...
...BECAUSE ONCE UPON A TIME....
...IT'S WHAT I WOULD HAVE SAID.
LINNHHH...
YOU MAY BE ME, JOHN... BUT I'M NOT YOU.
YOU'LL NEVER GET TIRED OF TRYING. BUT ME, WELL...I'M DONE. SO...BETTER YOU THAN ME.
GOOD-BYE, JOHN. SLEEP... PERCHANCE TO DREAM.
GOOD-BYE, TERRY.
GOOD-BYE--
--X-FACTOR.

THAT'S A LOT OF GOOD-BYES. YOU SHOULD GIVE SOMEONE A CHANCE TO SAY GOOD-BYE BACK.
OH, PERFECT.
YOU'RE NOT GOING TO KILL YOURSELF.
GREAT. NOW I'VE GOT NUNS WALKING IN AND TELLING ME WHAT THEY THINK I'M GOING TO DO.
NOT THINK. KNOW.
YEAH? HOW?
WELL...TWO REASONS.
FIRST...
I'M NOT REALLY A NUN. I JUST TOLD JOHN THAT BECAUSE, WELL...THE TRUTH IS A BIT MORE INVOLVED.
AND SECOND...

I KNOW STUFF.